

On Acceptance of the Third Musio Athayde Cancer Prize



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The recent conferment of the Mucio Athayde International Cancer award through the aegis of the UICC in August, 1998 has been a source of much satisfaction and happiness; in fact, it is a recognition of the effort of the entire oncologic community in India, a vast subcontinent rapidly reaching a population of 1 billion. It is also, I believe, a special acknowledgment for the Tata Memorial Centre, Bombay (an institution governed by the Department of Atomic Energy, Government of India) and a large number of my colleagues with whom we continue to plan need based anti-cancer strategies be it in preventive and therapeutic oncology or in cancer education or rehabilitation. Having spent more than 4 decades in the cancer field, this life time recognition, apart from the joy and happiness that it brings, is, I believe a stimulus, an inspiration to carry on with our work to fight cancer.

At the turn of the millennium we are on the threshold of an era of “cautious” optimism in the cancer field. Our current technology affords us opportunities to diagnose

most cancers earlier than ever before; preventive strategies can enable us to eliminate nearly 50% of the common cancers and with efficient and appropriate treatment we can cure nearly 70% of cancers diagnosed in an early stage. Pain relief and palliation can be achieved in almost all patients when cancer remains uncontrolled. For the first time in history reduction in cancer mortality has been reported in 1998.

Why then, amidst such an encouraging environment of new knowledge and new technology have our cure rates generally remained on a plateau since 1970 bar a few spikes here and there. Why is the public perception—although changing—still skeptical with regard to cancer cure and control, and cancer research?

For too long we have been ensconced and entrapped in an intensely “scientific & technologic” environment without appreciating the sensitivity and perceptions of those who are afflicted and their families. We must know that a technology oriented environment—and we cannot

escape this scenario—is not particularly patient friendly. It is precisely our increasing professional prowess that demands more sensitivity in dealing with our patients, and to ensure that we take medicine to the people in a simple language that is not only understood but is encouraging and reassuring, which will help demystify modern medicine.

This is just one reason why alternative medicine is taking major strides over technologic medicine. Much remains to be done not only in the developing countries but also in the developed countries. Apart from changing the perception in the community, cancer education among the professionals needs to be strengthened. In a developing country like India, socio-economic factors, disparate standards in cancer therapy, paucity of available diagnostic and therapeutic facilities, lack of well trained professionals in oncology are major factors which have a negative impact on the cancer scene. In our continuing efforts to improve this scenario a “School for Professional Cancer Education” with national and international collaboration through the UICC is being envisaged. The Mucio Athayde awards moneys will be utilised for training young Oncology Professionals in the proposed school where national and international students

and faculty will bridge the gaps to transcend national barriers towards a common cause.

It is important in life to know where we are but I believe it is more important to know where we are headed. Today we stand amidst a biologic revolution in medicine in general and cancer in particular. With molecular biology and its nuances are at a sea-change in human health and disease. Our technologies and biologic understanding are racing towards conferring immortality to the human system. At the turn of the century and into the next millennium, is this the road we wish to pursue, or do we wish also to cherish and preserve the age-old values of a human approach in medicine—the gentle and compassionate physician, knowledgeable in current technology and yet not going overboard at everything that is new; constantly weighing benefits against the risks, success against the failures and critically evaluating old treatments versus new techniques. Technology has conferred immense benefits to humankind but only when used with care and compassion. Let there be a harmonious synthesis of human values, technology and science in the pursuit of our objectives, for, if we do so we still have a great opportunity to preserve and restore to medicine the best tradition of the years that have gone by.